

I'm Supposed to be Telling This

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In her dreams, Ellen watches the car coming at her. She doesn't scream this time, just grabs the wheel and pulls the whole steering column out of the dash. She wakes up at the point of impact and vomits. In the shower, hot water streaks down her body, searing the silver-pink scars that scale her stomach. The silence of her black, black apartment drives her from the shower to a small downtown diner where she's spent nearly every night since Emmy died.

I vomit all the time now. The same way I live my life in the third person (but I'm sure that's developed from too many people talking about me like I'm not in the room). I've lost really more weight than I should. Sometimes I can feel myself melting away into nothing. Everything I eat, which isn't much in the first place, comes gushing back up at the slightest provocation. I've reached the point where I'm out of tears and there is nothing left to do but vomit.

I'm supposed to be telling this to my therapist, but I can't tell him anymore than I can tell myself. I find myself tiptoeing through the house, forgetting that it's quiet, not because it's nap time, but because she's dead. I can't talk about it. I sit through our sessions staring blankly at this man who's supposed to be curing me of my grief. I don't know what he says to me. I don't know how I respond. I just know that for two hours, twice a week, I sit in his office and stare at the purple folds beneath his eyes. When we're done he stands up and walks me to the door. It must be a frustrating job for him.

Jane is coming over for a visit, and although she didn't

say so, I'm sure she'll be bringing my mother. The only thing more pathetic than a mother who's lost her child is a mother who's child has lost her child. They'll sit on the sofa and I'll sit in the rocker. I'll concentrate on the sensation of my vertebrae fusing together as my neck slowly folds down into my tail bone. They'll carry on a conversation about me, around me, without me, because they know I can't participate. What am I supposed to say. "Yes, I heard it's going to rain tomorrow." It doesn't matter to me if it never rains, if it never stops.

Jane and Ellen's mother let themselves into Ellen's apartment and settle themselves on the couch. Ellen sits in the rocker and the longer they sit, the more she seems to shrink into the chair. Jane tries to keep a light repartee going, to fill in the abysmal silence of the room, to try to void the disgusting figure of Ellen's folding, shrinking body from her mind. She tells Ellen's mother how thin Ellen's become, how they must take her out for dessert soon. Ellen goes into the bathroom and vomits, splashes her face with water and returns to the rocker where she immediately begins to absorb her spinal cord, one disk at a time.

Joe calls every so often--my mother must put him up to it. He sounds no more eager to talk to me than I am to him. He tells me how horrible this all is, how much he misses her, and to please call him if I need anything. I can't think of a thing I'd need. I just stumble from room to room waiting for my stomach to dislodge whatever I put in it last. How could he know? He hasn't been here for the last three years of her life--the literal last three. When he wakes from a nightmare there are soothing arms to cradle him, rock him back to sleep. First thing in the morning he hears his new son crying, walks in and holds him, pats his smooth belly and kisses his purple nose.

No one's made the suggestion yet, but I wait and wait

and wait. It's coming. It hovers around everyone's head like a bee around a rotten apple. Will you have more? You should, you know. It will help. I know it's hard to think about, but maybe you should try again. Like Emmy was some vague hypothesis I was testing. See if you can keep this child alive, and if not, try again. When she slept, her mouth folded over on one end and dangled open on the other. Her cheeks smoothed out and fluttered with every breath. The blue veins in her eyelids, the down that never left her shoulders and back, her fingers curled around a pony that chirped "I'm pretty" when she squeezed it. How do you try again for that?

It's so hard, and so easy, for people to die. An ashtray to the temple or a little lead cylinder lodged in a lung. Or Ellen's friend, dead from flying through a windshield, resuscitated, in a coma for three months, planning an April wedding now. What was left to wrap up for a gift? Ellen told her good-bye in the hospital, bent over a swollen, blue face that looked nothing like the person Ellen had come to see. Those tubes that made her shudder, shoved through skin in the most unlikely places, dripping with some sweet, secret force, had brought her back to life. How can something so hard to do be so easy? How can one body forcefully exit a car and go on to marry and another be smashed inside the car and never go on to see second grade?

Ellen sits in the waiting room until her therapist comes to call her name. She walks dully back to his office and sits in the leather chair she's been sitting in for seventeen months. He smiles--she knows because the purple folds under his eyes become shorter and fatter for a few seconds. He starts talking and she's aware that she's answering. He's asking about Joe. And her mother. She's telling him something she can't quite hear. "Are you

there," he asks and she answers no.

Walking to my car, I inhale deeply and for a second the air stings my throat. It reminds me of something far away. Spring, track team, high school. I remember gasping for air and the icy-hot sensation as I bent forward and sweat ran down tendrils of hair and dripped into the cinders of the track. I walk back into the therapist's office and tell the receptionist I need to speak with the man I just saw. She buzzes his desk and he comes out. "I don't know your name," I tell him. "Les," he says. There's nothing else to say, so when he nods, I leave. I walk back into the open air and start to run.